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## DO CREATION AND FLOOD MYTHS FOUND WORLD WIDE HAVE A COMMON ORIGIN?

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### ABSTRACT

An extensive review of both creation and flood myths reveals that there is a basic core of themes in all of the extant creation and flood myths. This fact gives strong evidence of a common origin of the myths based on actual historical events. The Genesis account, however, stands in stark contrast to all the other renditions. This is in part true because we have more knowledge and understanding about this account, but also because it shows a lack of the corruption found in other creation and flood stories. The other stories are now rightly referred to as myths, because they have added mythological elements to the original history. The original historical events can be seen through the modifications and embellishments, however, which were added from generation to generation.

### INTRODUCTION

One concern about teaching creationism in public schools relates to the fact that numerous "creation myths" exist, and if the Judeo-Christian-Muslim<sup>1</sup> version is taught, the Babylonian, Syrian, American Indian and myriads of other creation myths should also be required. A common argument in both the popular press and the scientific literature against teaching creationism is that if both positions, the religious (creationism) and scientific, are taught in the schools creationists must:

in order to avoid hypocrisy insist that American Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, and all other religious concepts regarding the origin of life are presented as well. They do not. They believe their concept constitutes divine truth. Evolution is a theory, nothing more. Its adherents do not claim the mantle of divine truth. This is the crux of the matter [6, p. 6].

It is often claimed that none of these myths are based on "scientific" evidence, and are all scientifically inaccurate. (A survey by the author found that most creation scientists do *not* want Biblical creationism taught, but rather want evolution taught objectively including all of the evidence against this view.) Other persons have concluded that creation myths should be taught, but only in appropriate classes such as social studies. Even here, they should be presented only as ancient stories devoid of factual content.

This conclusion is not only extremely superficial, it is also wrong. First of all, there exists no analogous creation myth in Hindu or Buddhist philosophy, both teach that the universe was not created. Secondly, although almost every culture has a creation myth, most all are basically variations of the core theme of the creation story found in Genesis. Freund [14, p. 6] concluded from a study of origin myths that, although they came from all over the world, nonetheless they all have "haunting similarities." Good evidence exists that the source of **all** creation myths, or what Sproul calls *primal myths*, stem back to a common human experience or some actual historical event [51; 8]. If their origin was from a single early source, oral transmission, time and local cultural circumstances could have embellished or, at the least, modified them, sometimes greatly.

We would for this reason expect that the details of the extant creation myths would vary, but that the *basic outline* would be similar or, at the least, most of the stories would have common elements [42]. Conversely, the Genesis account, partly due to what Hasel (1974) calls its "antimythical polemic," stands in stark contrast to most every other creation story [19]. Even Darwinian evolution, a position that Fahs and Spoerl [13, p. 53] call "the newest of all the stories of the beginnings of life," is also classified as a "creation myth" by those who study primal myths. Evolutionism is, in contrast to most all of the others creation myths, the only one that does *not* involve creation by outside intelligence. Evolution also has not resolved, in spite of the increase of technical instruments, the basic question of origins [55, p. 3].

## BASIC CLASSES OF CREATION MYTHS

Creation stories are commonly classified into a small number of basic groups, and many individual myths contain two or more elements of these themes [35]. This small grouping is evidence that, although altered in time, most creation myths had their origin from an actual set of events or records.

1. **Creation From Nothing.** This idea involves the Creator “calling forth into being” the creation that came into existence totally as a result of His will. In this class includes the Navajo and Mayan Creation stories [31, p. 59]. Christianity has traditionally taught that creation was from “nothing” or *ex-nihilo* and several Scriptures support this view. Genesis states six times “and God said...and so it was” indicating creation *ex-nihilo* for at least part of the creation or, at some point in time, all physical reality. Steindl-Rast notes that sometimes how the Supreme Being in creation myths

made the world is described in elaborate myths; sometimes only the fact of creation is stated, as when the Baining of New Britain say: “He brought all things into being by inexplicable ways.” Frequently the Supreme Being is described as making the world by thinking it [into existence], by a word of command, by singing or by merely wishing it to be. The Wijot in northern California, for example, say: “The Old Man Above did not use earth and sticks to make men. He simply thought, and there they were” [52, p. 7].

2. **Creation from Chaos.** The occurrence of creation from chaos, or the producing of a structure from undifferentiated material is a common theme. Creation from chaos myths generally stress that creation is the process of forming the earth and living things from an existing chaos or mass of undefined, unstructured elements [31, p. 59]. Excellent examples include the Greek, Chinese, Finnish, Indian, Japanese, and Egyptian creation myths. Christie [7, p. 47] notes, “for the Chinese...creation was the act of reducing chaos to order, a theme which persists throughout Chinese thought.”

From the original chaos, order was caused to occur as a result of some activity, force, or process. This is the theme of Genesis 1: 1-2 that teaches that the earth was undifferentiated in the beginning or, as Gen. 1: 1 says “And the earth was without form and void.” The *Soncino Press Version*, uses the phrase the Earth was “unformed and void,” a term Goodspeed translates as “desolate waste.” The Greek creation myth states “in the beginning, there came Nothing, alone. It was sometimes called Chaos, or the Void. But it was Nothing” [21, p. 127]. Then “out of Nothing came” heaven, the earth, the sea and everything else.

3. **Emergence Myths.** In this category God creates the material *ex-nihilo*, and then forms or shapes it into useful forms. Humans and other parts of creation thus *emerge* from some other substances or preexisting material. Good examples include the formation of man from the dust of the earth, and of woman from made from Adam’s side. God, as related in Genesis 1:11-12\*, also formed all plants from the existing earth

Then God said, “Let the earth produce vegetation, seed-bearing plants and the various kinds of fruit-trees that bear fruit containing their seed!” And so...the earth brought forth vegetation, the various kinds of seed-bearing plants and the various kinds of trees that bear fruit containing their seed. And God saw that it was good.

The Scriptures often refer to God as a *potter*, molding an existing substance into something else (Jer. 18: 1-9). Creation myths commonly describe man’s creation in this way. Mbiti concludes that “metaphor of the potter is commonly used to describe God’s creative activity” in ancient African creation myths, and that Africans:

hold that “there was nothing before God created the world”....God created out of nothing, in the original act of creation, though now He may use existing materials to continue His creative activities. This concept of creation *ex nihilo* is also reported among the Nuer, Banyarwanda and Shona, and undoubtedly a careful search...is likely to show that there are other peoples who [also] incorporate it into their cosmologies [36, pp. 39-40].

Mbiti adds that

The Ila have three names for God ... Creator, Moulder, and Constructor. The Tiv who are famed for their woodwork think of God as the Carpenter Who “carves” the world, giving it different forms and shapes. When the Lunda speak of God as “the Father Creator,” they place Him on a parental level: He fathered all things, and exercises His fatherly care over them [36, p. 40].

Parrinder adds that the Africans view God as the molder of all life, and one who:

As Creator, he made all things...shaped things, like a woman fashioning pots that she makes out of clay. He put things together and constructed them, like a builder making a house... Some of the names given to God in African ritual, proverbs and myths, show what

men think of his character and attributes. He is first of all Creator, Moulder, Giver of Breath and Souls, God of Destiny...the work of making men was entrusted to Great God, and he made human beings from the earth and moulded their physical features. But the task of bringing these dummies to life was reserved for the Creator alone [44, pp. 19, 20].

Important examples of emergence myths include Acoma, Hopi, Navajo, and most New World Creation myths in agricultural societies [31, p. 58]. The Navajo Aztecs, and pueblos all teach all life as well as the first man and woman were created from the earth by God or the gods [33]. Examples of emergence idea are found in many places in Genesis, such as 1:3-10, 14-19 which reads:

Then God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light; and God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day and the darkness night...Then God said, "Let there be a firmament in the middle of the water so to divide the waters in two!" And so it was. ... Then God said, "Let the waters below the sky be gathered into one place so that the dry land may appear!" And so it was. ... Then God said, "Let there be luminaries in the firmament of the sky to separate day from night; let them serve for signs for fixed times, and for days and years; and let them serve as luminaries in the firmament of the sky to shed light on the earth!"

Many myths also teach creation through "the word" or the logos (see also John 1:1, 16) [10, p. xxiii]. The term "myth" is from the Greek word *mythos* "which means word in the sense of final authority" [21, p. x]. In this category God or gods create through *sounds* including verbal commands or even coughs, crackles, or hisses. Genesis states that creation came about because God verbally ordered it to occur: "God *stated*, 'Let there be, and there it was!'"

**4. Separation Myths.** In many myths, divisions or a separation of "parents" or of something else occurs. Hasel [23, p. 87] found that the "idea of the creation of heaven and earth by division is common to all ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies" and in myths the world over. One Polynesian myth teaches that darkness once rested upon the heaven and earth until the light and darkness were separated by God [31]. Genesis contains several separation examples in creation, such as the division of the waters, and of night and day.

**5. Creation From a Cosmic Egg.** Some creation myths include the concept of a *Cosmic Egg*, a "germ" or some raw material such as water or clay that God created or already existed, and out of which He formed humans, animals, plants, the earth or some other part of the universe [55, pp. 224-232]. Examples include Indian, Phoenician, Egyptian, Orphic, Chinese, and other texts [55]. Christie notes a third-century Chinese myth taught that Chaos:

...was like a hen's egg. At this time neither Earth nor Heaven existed. From this egg, Phan-ku was born. The parts of the egg separated, the heavy elements forming the Earth, and the light, pure ones the Sky. These were *yin* and *yang*. . . The concept of the world egg is not confined to China, nor [to] that of the primordial being from whom all else is derived. In classical Indian cosmogonies, a world egg occurs which opens to form the heavens from its upper part, earth from its lower [by] Brahma, the creator, ... these parallels [may be]...the result of direct influences between India and China or represent traditions deriving from a common source [7, pp. 49, 53-54].

The cosmological view currently in vogue among secular scientists, the big bang hypothesis (called the "standard model" because of its wide acceptance) also postulates a "cosmic egg" from which the entire universe sprang [32; 50; 57].

The Genesis account of Creation also contains elements of similarity with the Cosmic Egg concept. In Genesis 1:1-25, an earth shrouded in darkness and "without form and void" is first bathed in light and then divided into dry land and seas from whence plant and animal life springs forth. In Genesis, of course, the spring forth of dry land and seas with their abundant plant and animal life earth is occasioned by the power of God's Word, not inherent powers of "cosmic egg" earth. The production of animals that produce "after its kind" is obvious in many sections of the creation account:

Then God said, "Let the waters teem with [or produce]...living creatures and let birds fly over the earth across the firmament of the sky!" And so it was. God created the great sea-monsters and all the various kinds of living, gliding creatures with which the waters teem, and all the various kinds of winged birds. God saw that it was good, and God blessed them...

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth [or produce] the various kinds of living creatures, the various kinds of domestic animals, reptiles, and wild beasts of the earth!" And so it was. God made [from the earth] the various kinds of wild beasts of the earth, the various kinds of domestic animals, and all the various kinds of land reptiles; and God saw that it was good (Genesis 1:20-25).

6. The last major creation myth category is the **Earth-Divider Myths** or where a divine being divides the water by bringing the land up from the sea, permanently separating the two. Genesis 1:10 says that God divided the land and water by commanding “let the dry ground appear [out from the sea] and it was so; and God called the dry ground earth, and the basin of waters he called Seas” (Byington Version).

In addition, an “enormous number of creation myths....involve the sun, and the life-giving, regenerative properties of light...is almost universally identified with primarily creative forces. Everywhere the sun or light plays an important, if not a central role..” in creation (Van Over, 1980, p. 15-16). The Scriptures also often use the word sun and light in this sense, even stating that “God is light” (1 John 1:5 see also Isaiah 2:4, Mic 7:8; John 1:7-9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:36; Acts 13:47; 26:18; 26:23 and other verses).

The term light often refers not only to physical light, but also to knowledge and insight. The first act of God after the creation of the heavens was light: “there was darkness over the surface of the deep” so God said “Let there be light” and there was light. The importance of light (knowledge and wisdom) is likewise reflected in virtually all non-biblical creation stories.

### **THE BASIS FOR CREATION MYTHS**

The above outline of myth types illustrates that the essential categories of all creation myths are directly taught, or at least clearly reflected, in Genesis. Furthermore, the fact that these concepts are almost universal suggests a common origin in a set of events that actually occurred, or came from some ancient common source that was transmitted to later generations by their ancestors. Adam and Eve gave their immediate descendants information that became part of later historical records, parts of which later became incorporated in Genesis. As the descendants of Adam scattered, they would have carried what they remembered (likely primarily the essential elements) of the history found in Genesis [42].

This history was oral in most cultures for years, and therefore would be embellished and changed as a society developed [1]. Also, many of the mythologies would have made use of actual historical events known to the hearers/readers, often adding heroic or tragic or moralistic or other elements for a particular audience or the reigning king. The historical basis would be presumed by the storyteller, but lost to us. As is clear from our study of creation myths, though, many of the essential elements have remained the same [35]. All of the creation myths appear to be basically derived from the events that Genesis is based upon, and in many cases large remnants of the original story remain. Genesis stands in contrast to all of the other creation accounts because it contains none of the embellishments common to the others, but only the bare outline of historical events [19].

### **FLOOD STORIES FOUND IN NEARLY EVERY CULTURE**

Strickling concluded from his study of flood legends from all over the world that “nearly all” flood accounts “are variations of the theme in the biblical account ... however, a statistical analysis indicates the purity of the biblical account and reveals evidence of subsequent upheavals having corrupted in varying degrees all other accounts” [53, p. 152]. Among the similarities that Strickling found include a favored family was saved in thirty-two of the flood accounts, and in twenty-one survival was due to a “boat” of some type. He concluded that a correlation exists between them in the following areas: 1) survival by boat, 2) a forewarning, 3) one flood only, and 4) preservation of non-human types of life such as animals. The same correspondence with the biblical account is also found in world wide-creation accounts.

Among the aspects of the early history of the world found in Genesis and the flood that also appear in many or most creation stories are the confusion of tongues at Babel. Syrian, Sumerian, Greek, Babylonian, Chinese, Persian and even the Estonian, Irish, American Indian, Toltec and Cholulan creation stories all include a variant of the flood story. In the American Indian tradition the flood causes “universal destruction” because the world grew “extremely sinful” [37]. Warshofsky notes regarding the great flood that “with variations” the

biblical account of a great, universal flood is part of the mythology and legend of *almost every culture on earth*. Even people living far from the sea—the Hopi Indians in the American Southwest, the Incas high in the Peruvian Andes—have legends of a great flood... covering the tops of the mountains and wiping out virtually all life on earth [56, p. 129, emphasis mine].

In a study of over 200 creation myths, Morris [40, p. 4] found the similarities shown in Table I.

**Table I: World Flood Myth**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Percent that Contain</b>
1. Catastrophe a flood only, not other type	95%
2. Was flood global?	95%
3. A favored family saved?	88%
4. Was the geography local?	82%
5. Was the rainbow mentioned?	75%
6. Did animals play any part?	73%
7. Was survival due to a boat?	70%
8. Were animals also saved?	67%
9. Was flood due to wickedness of mankind?	66%
10. Were they forewarned?	66%
11. Did survivors land on a mountain?	57%
12. Were birds sent out?	35%
13. Did survivors offer a sacrifice?	13%
14. Were specifically eight persons saved?	9%

Morris concluded from his study that:

One of the strongest evidences for the global flood which annihilated all people on Earth except for Noah and his family, has been the ubiquitous presence of flood legends in the folklore of people groups from around the world....Local geography and cultural aspects may be present but they all seem to be telling the same story [40, p. 4].

Morris also argued that anthropological research indicates that often a myth is

the faded memory of a real event. Details may have been added, lost, or obscured in the telling and retelling, but the kernel of truth remains. When two separate cultures have the same "myth" in their body of folklore, their ancestors must have either experienced the same event, or they both descended from a common ancestral source which itself experienced the event [40, p. 4].

### **THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH**

The Gilgamesh epic, an ancient Babylonian story written about 1,000 B.C., although primarily a tragic love story, is most well known today for its flood account [17; 24]. The Gilgamesh flood account is not only roughly parallel to the biblical story of Noah, but both accounts contain many remarkably similar details [25; 29]. It was not written specifically to explain the story of creation, but to convey the tragedy of life [7]. Gilgamesh, although not written as history, uses known historical events and embellishes upon them for the sake of immortalizing a hero. Americans have done the same such as with Johnny Appleseed and George Washington. Sandars concluded the story of Gilgamesh is the first tragic non-biblical hero of whom anything is known and is about

...man in his search for...understanding, and of this search the conclusion must be tragic. It is perhaps surprising that anything so old as a story of the third millennium B.C. should still have power to move, and still attract readers in the twentieth century A.D., and yet it does. The narrative is incomplete and may remain so; nevertheless, it is today the first surviving epic poem from any period until the appearance of Homer's *Iliad*: and it is immeasurably older [47, p. 7].

The modern rediscovery of this account by George Smith of the *Society of Biblical Archeology*, stirred international attention. Smith reported in 1872 that he located a previously "unknown" account of the flood in Assyrian tablets in the British Museum [23]. He soon published the *Chaldean Account of the Deluge* based on his incomplete tablets. The support for his work encouraged a search for more tablets [24]. Smith later found many of the missing lines of the flood description that was then, and still is today, "the most complete and best preserved part of the whole Epic" [47, p. 10].

The Gilgamesh flood narrative is only a small part of the whole story, and is at best a backdrop to the story. Its inclusion in the Epic was primarily to help elucidate the struggle to find a "meaning and purpose in life." Even a cursory reading shows that it was not meant to be an historical account, although its source was obviously history that was passed down from the survivors of "the great flood." Thus, Sandars notes that

Although the gods play a great part in the epic...Gilgamesh appears to have been...a secular poem...There is no suggestion that it was recited as part of a religious ritual, as was the great Babylonian poem of creation, the *Enuma Elish*, though it contains quasi-religious material in the laments over the dead, and in the set pieces of "Wisdom". It is a secular narrative, divided into loosely connected episodes covering the most important events in the life of the hero [47, p. 30].

Although it is often claimed that the biblical account of the deluge was derived from this Babylonian source, it is more reasonable to conclude that both accounts came from a still older source, possibly one of those that Moses used to write Genesis [17, p. 50; see also 23 and 39, pp. 25-26].

### WHY THE SIMILARITY IN CREATION MYTHS?

Van Over, a leading myth researcher who refers to the “creation myth” narratives as “sun songs,” concludes, “The surprising and perplexing fact is that the *basic* themes for [creation] myths in widely different geographical areas are *strikingly similar*” [54, p. 10, emphasis mine]. Typical is an analysis of 300 North American Indian creation myths that found a “small number of myth-types” [46, p. 508]. Variations exist according to culture differences and other factors, but a few basic themes were commonly found in virtually all of them. Another extensive analysis of ancient African creation myths by Mbiti concluded that:

Over the whole of Africa creation is the most widely acknowledged work of God. This concept is expressed...[in the teaching] that God created all things, through giving Him the name of Creator (or Moulder, or Maker), and through addressing Him in prayer and invocations as the Creator. We have abundant examples of what African peoples say concerning the creative activity of God... [36, p. 39].

He adds that the title given to God by the Akans

means “Excavator, Hewer, Carver, Creator, Originator, Inventor, Architect”; and the people hold firmly that it was God alone Who created the world. The universe is described as having its architectural origin and form from God, Who is here pictured as its Artist-in-Chief. Of the four most known Akamba names for God, two mean “Creator” or “Maker” and “Clever”. The second of these (*Mwatuangi*), is taken from the human act of slicing meat with a knife or splitting wood with an axe. So God first creates, originates, molds and makes; then He gives shape, supplies details and adds distinctiveness and character [36, p. 39].

The New Guinea myths comprise another example. Pospisil, in a study of a Kapauku population of West New Guinea, concluded that they believe that the Creator, Ugatame, designed the Universe and all life, and that “Ugatame is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent” and is “credited with the creation of all things and with having determined all events.” Furthermore, the “Creator is beyond this phenomenal dimension, because of the simple reason that he created it. Because he is ... not of phenomenal nature, he is able to be omnipresent” [45, pp. 83-84].

These basic themes of most creation myths are all contained in the outline found in the second chapter of Genesis. As Van Over [54, p. 11] queries, “Why such similarity of mythic ideas and images” throughout widely differing and distant cultures? Among the many scholars who have puzzled over this phenomena was the renowned Claude Levi-Strauss. After years of studying creation myths, he concluded that there exists an “astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions” of the world [34, p. 308].

That world creation myths “resemble one another to an extraordinary degree” [28, p. 53; see also 34, p. 308 and 27] is not debated; *why* they are so much alike is the concern. The scholarly arguments over why this similarity exists “has raged for decades and it continues to this day. No definite answer seems yet to have developed, but theories abound” [54, p. 11].

One theory is that the source of most of the extant creation myths is from events that occurred in most ancient cultures. This view was expressed by Van Over as follows, “My personal view after studying myths for many years is that creation myths seem to rise from the depths of the human psyche” or experience, and this helps to explain their similarity [54, p. 11]. In the words of Von Franz, “creation myths are the deepest and most important of all myths” [55, p. 1]. Van Over adds that all creation myths

clearly carry an intense human desire to shape and structure a confusing and troublesome reality, to give meaning and insight where before only shadows reigned. This seems ... [to be one] impulse that guided the makers of myths, and thus they became a necessary human function; for they give shape and meaning to our lives. They also serve the needs of our age and our personal spirits [54, p. 11-12].

The need to understand our origins is manifestly basic to humans, and seeking an answer does not fully explain the similarity of the creation accounts or even the source of this common need and why it is universal. Another position—that argued here—is that the origin of these myths is from actual historical events. Regardless of whether the myths were originally created by different groups in various places of the world (and their similarity was because they were influenced by common psychological human needs) or they had their origin in an actual set of events, time would embellish, romanticize, and tailor

the original story to local people's customs, needs and traditions [42]. Periodic influences from outside of the culture also likely occurred. For example, in China most

if not all, mythologies include an account of the creation of the world and its inhabitants, both human and animal...what we have is rudimentary and gives every appearance of being the product of scholarly compilers who were, generally, concerned to recount cosmogonies as parables.... The most extensive account of the creation ... has survived only in texts from the third to sixth centuries A.D...There are, on the other hand, accounts of the structure of the world rather than of its creation which...are older than the Phan-ku myth and seem to belong to an original Chinese tradition [7, p. 46-47].

The tendency for time and culture to embellish or modify influences *most* other historical accounts also supports the conclusion that their original source is from actual historical events or common human needs.

Rooth's study of 300 North American creation myths found that "there is one type of creation myth found all over North America that emphatically asserts that there were Two Creators, or rather one creator and a companion" [46, p. 507]. These two creators are a father and son or two related gods such as an uncle and nephew. This resembles the Christian teaching that God originated the creation, and created through His son (John 1:1, 1:16). Furthermore, the Hebrew writer of Genesis 1 referred to the creator in the plural form: "let *us* make man in *our* image."

Another example called the *serpent myth* is found in Gen. 3:1-15. Research on this myth has found that the serpent (snakes) has been a major religious symbol in almost every society throughout history [41]. The serpent is discussed in Genesis 3:1; 1,14; 3:1-4, 14-15, part of which says that the

serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." And the serpent said unto the woman, "Ye shall not surely die." And the Lord God said unto the serpent, "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed ... upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life, and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Do serpents today impel close to universal loathing due to primordial sensitivities rooted in the past? (The rare exception includes in the Hindu mythology, which sees snakes as both creators and destroyers of life, symbolism that also may trace its roots back to Genesis.) Unlike almost all animals, the serpent provokes certain patterns of innate, often irrational fear, from most humans. One study of serpent myths throughout the world lent support to the view that their original source was the historical events described in Genesis [41].

### **THE PROBLEM OF MEANING IN UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT CREATION MYTHS**

Many ancient "creation accounts" like the Gilgamesh epic are obviously didactic stories written not primarily to inform the reader about the means of physical creation, but to teach some moral principle by obvious folk-hero stories, or to instruct about some religious tradition [23]. In contrast to Genesis, many of the creation myths are written by "philosophers and teachers" and only incidentally refer to creation [14]. Their primary purpose is not to discuss origins, and often they only indirectly refer to it as a past event. Many, like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, are concerned primarily with problems of living and life [10]. Nonetheless, a strong similarity exists between most creation myths and Genesis.

A major difficulty in understanding ancient creation myths is determining the degree that the ancients understood them as literal. If archeologists ten thousand years from now unearthed certain remains of contemporary American civilization, they could easily assume, based only on this evidence, that Americans believed in a literal creatures called Santa Clauses, flying reindeer and tooth fairies. Few persons today believe that the earth has four corners, the sun rises or sets, automobiles are "self-movers," (*auto* = self, *mobile* = move), motion-pictures are pictures that actually move, or cameras "take" a picture (after the picture is "taken," it is obviously still there). Expressions such as "I could die of embarrassment" or "I could kill him for doing that" are not literal and no one, except possibly young children, interprets these common vivid figures of speech literally.

These examples illustrate the difficulty in understanding a culture from a few isolated artifacts, especially words [58]. There likewise exists evidence that the ancients may not have literally believed that Zeus caused rain, the sun was a god, or many of their other myths were literally true [11; 49]. Better understanding of the ancients may have altered our modern picture of them [9]. This new view argues that our modern understanding of the earliest religion

stands in sharp contrast to the preconceived notions anthropologists had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They simply took it for granted that all religious notions and the



human mind in general must have developed step by step in close parallel to physiological evolution from a “savage” stage to ever greater refinement. Within our century, however, a wealth of objective material has been accumulated which proves that the most ancient cultural stratum to which we can penetrate by anthropological methods is simple but by no means “savage” [52, p. 7].

Did these philosophers accept beliefs or ideas that historians today claim were in vogue at the time, such as the assumption that stones fall to the ground because they’re “returning home” or water floats up into the heavens when it becomes steam because it is also returning home (the natural home of water is the heaven, of stones, the earth)? We do not know exactly how they understood these possibly poetic explanations, but we do know that they used just as much metaphor and symbolism as we do today [51]. Of course, past generations believed that many things that we today recognize as wrong, such as a flat earth or geocentricity, but mankind has always loved stories, and most ancient myths are just this. And unless a compelling reason exists not to, myths should be viewed as stories both to entertain and, more importantly, to teach important lessons about life [43; 2]. Ellis claims that:

the ancient peoples who constructed them did not subscribe to a “literal” interpretation of them. The truth content of myth was considered to be higher, in a moral or religious sense, than merely a description of physical reality. For anyone in the twentieth century to ascribe “literal” reality to these ancient myths is almost too comical in itself to need further ridicule [11, p. 11].

Plato's writings, Aesop's fables and other literary works clearly demonstrate that the ancients had a tremendous amount of insight into life and living and, indeed, if the reader could understand ancient Greek, he or she probably would feel at home in the company of the likes of Aesop, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, and would no doubt learn much from them [22].

Most historians conclude that modern humans have no monopoly on wisdom, and that the greatest of the ancient scientists were, “considering the handicaps under which they worked, fully the equals of any in our own time” [26, p. 53; 29]. To assimilate into our world, the ancients would have to adapt to our technology, but not necessarily to our “worldly wisdom.” In the words of Levi-Strauss, the conclusion that myths were only naive attempts to explain reality is incorrect:

Some claim that human societies merely express, through their mythology, fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, such as love, hate, or revenge, or that they try to provide some kind of explanations for phenomena which they cannot otherwise understand – astronomical, meteorological, and the like. But why should these societies do it in such elaborate and devious ways, when all of them are also acquainted with empirical explanations? [34, p. 308]

No evidence exists that the *brain* or *human intelligence* has undergone an evolutionary progression since at least the dawn of recorded history [5]. Evolutionary assumptions would dictate that the farther back in time one travels, the more “primitive,” less sophisticated and more foolish human beliefs about the natural world become. Where this is actually true, it is primarily because accumulated knowledge gives successive generations an advantage over their predecessors. And an ancient Greek or Roman would feel fully at home in our culture—if he or she were raised in it [4].

The benefits of accumulated knowledge of past generations, an advantage that has been especially true during the past several centuries in the West, tends to distort our evaluation of the ancients. The ancients had a tremendous amount of insight and knowledge, and we are selling them short in viewing their creation myths as the product of ignorance [52]. Chiera notes that the Babylonian and Assyrian “Creation stories [were] ancient cosmogonies [with] sophisticated philosophical substratum” [5, p. 110]. Levi-Strauss claims that attempts to explain putative differences between

the so-called primitive mind and scientific thought have resorted to qualitative differences between the working processes of the mind in both cases, while assuming that the entities which they were studying remained very much the same...the kind of logic in mythological thought is as rigorous as that of modern science,...the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied. This is well in agreement with the situation known to prevail in the field of technology: What makes a steel axe superior to a stone axe is not that the first one is better made...but steel is quite different from stone. In the same way...man has always been thinking equally well; the improvement lies, not in an alleged progress of man's mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers [34, p. 325].

This increase in knowledge notwithstanding, much still exists about which we remain ignorant. And there are many problems that we are no closer to solving today than were the ancients. Speculations about the origin of the universe abound, and a study of many of the time-tested truths of the ancients helps us to realize that we have been meandering around the truth, and in some ways they were closer to it [15; 4]. Life has not changed in many important ways since humans arrived on this planet. Eating,

sleeping, working, loving and hurting have, aside from the influence of cultural variations, all been much the same since the start of recorded history. Cities from earliest recorded history were far more complex than we had assumed only a few years ago [52]. Except for lacking modern gadgetry, they were in many ways similar to modern cities [20].

The problem of understanding symbolism likewise exists in interpreting the Hebrew creation account recorded in the first few chapters of Genesis. We have a significant advantage in understanding ancient Hebrew and Greek works because we have a huge body of literature about them compared to the mythology of dead cultures [18]. Furthermore, thousands of ancient extant writings exist that discuss the various nuances and meaning of words that can be used to aid in understanding biblical manuscripts. This is not true for most of the other myths. Many are far removed from Western civilization and culture, and in many cases their meaning was long ago lost in history. The Babylonian and many other cultures are dead, and no wealth of information is now available to help us understand them to the extent that exists for the Hebrew and early Christian culture and beliefs.

Also, the extant manuscripts for the Genesis account are far more complete than other ancient creation accounts, and the record can be used as an historical outline to direct research. It has also been more extensively studied than any other ancient manuscript, enabling us to draw conclusions about the meaning of the Genesis account with far more assurance than the creation accounts of other cultures. Genesis was not intended to be primarily a didactic story, but a matter-of-fact brief summary of the creation of the heavens and earth. Well known popular science writer and leading Darwinists and outspoken atheist Isaac Asimov concluded that:

The Biblical writers...labored to produce something that was as reasonable and as useful as possible. In doing so, they succeeded wonderfully. There is no version of primeval history, preceding the discoveries of modern science, that is as rational and as inspiring as that of the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis [3, p. 3].

Furthermore, the Genesis creation account was both validated and explained by Christ, the Apostles and the early church, and they lived not in a "primitive" civilization but in cities much like ours. Nonetheless, as is true of all creation accounts, the Biblical account uses certain figures of speech and allegories. The reference to the earth's four corners obviously does not refer to a physical, four-corner structure, but is an expression that was common then, and is still so today. The only problem is to determine which statements are literal and *which* are symbolic [38; 39]. Unfortunately, in order to reduce the credibility of the biblical record, many critics try to literalize portions that are obviously not meant to be such, even assuming that certain allusions refer to ancient myths, such as claiming that the Genesis "firmament" is the metal dome that some ancients believed encircled the earth [3]. On the other hand, others try to ignore the clear meaning of the Biblical text to fit the creation account into the latest secular ideas, sometimes with tragic consequences.

### **SOME CONCLUSIONS**

A major problem in understanding the non-Hebrew creation myths is that many of them are nonsensical in view of our understanding of science today. This does not mean that the non-Hebrew creation myths were not understandable at one time, only that the difficulties in translation and understanding the phraseology meaning and symbols used by various ancient cultures must be dealt with for them to be understood today.

For this reason, specific interpretations of the various non-Genesis creation stories are often fraught with difficulties. Consequently the conclusions of some, such that it is "plain from the evidence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* that the Babylonians were social evolutionists," is unwarranted [47, p. 31]. Although they have similar themes and common basic skeletons, the Hebrew account stands apart from all creation myths in many major ways [see 10]. The Genesis myth is in Hasel's words "antimythical," meaning a simple description of events void of pagan embellishments (1974). Hasel summarizes his investigation of the creation account of Gen. 1 in comparison with

ancient Near Eastern analogues has repeatedly pointed into one direction. ...With a great many safeguards Gen. 1 employs certain terms and motifs,...partly chosen in deliberate contrast to comparable ancient Near Eastern concepts, and uses them with a meaning and emphasis not only consonant with but expressive of the purpose, world-view, and understanding of reality as expressed in this Hebrew account of creation...the Genesis cosmology represents not only a "complete break" with the ancient Near Eastern mythological cosmologies but represents a parting of the spiritual ways brought about by a conscious and deliberate antimythical polemic which meant an undermining of the prevailing mythological cosmologies [23, p. 91].

We must conclude with Francis Schaeffer's study of flood myths when he said that

among the common myths in the world's history, no other one is so widespread as the story of the flood. From China to the American Indians and even the pre-Colombian Indians, one finds in strange forms the myth of the great flood. Most of these myths have

weird elements—foolish elements, for example the descriptions of the boat that was used. In the Bible these strange and foolish elements are not there. We would say, then, that the Bible gives us the history of the flood; the myths all over the world are contorted, but show that men everywhere have a memory of it. Here in the Bible is the one flood story whose details, including the construction of the vessel, are reasonable [48, pp. 129-130].

It is clear from our review that a comparative study of creation myths can be a very beneficial part of any school curriculum [12; 13]. Research of ancient cultures finds that stories that attempt to explain the existence of humans, animals, plants, the world, and the universe “are found in almost every culture in the world, both in the religions of archaic peoples and in the greatest civilization religions” [35, p. 19]. The universality of creation myths points to a basic human need for a *causal* explanation of our world, and public schools have an obligation to try to meet this legitimate educational need.

\* all quotes, unless noted, are from the Goodspeed version.

<sup>1</sup> The Christian and Muslim creation stories are both based on the Hebrew account and all three are substantially the same in most of the major details (51).

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